Love, Laughter, and Spirituality in Marriage

By Barbara Workman

To strengthen your eternal companionship, feed it a balanced diet of the things that make it grow.

We couldn’t understand Larry and his new wife. Medical school shouldn’t allow time to play tennis so frequently, but that’s what they were doing—and they were even going on vacations! Being a few years older and wiser, we knew life was too serious for the amount of time they were spending just enjoying each other. But for twenty years now we’ve watched that marriage continue with the same exhilaration, and we love to be with them because we know there will be smiles and laughter.

Larry explained his philosophy to us soon after we met him: “Our marriage is an eternal relationship. If it is strong and happy, then I can live with whatever challenges life brings. If it isn’t, then no wonderful job or anything else can make up for that loss. Our marriage is going to get the highest priority of my time, money, and energy.”

Lately my husband, Dan, and I have thought about the different facets of our marriage. We have reminisced about falling in love, about growing spiritually, and about the things that have made us laugh and cry through thirty-eight years, nine children, and twenty-six moves.

We have come to know more clearly what we want most in our marriage—love, laughter, and spirituality. We want to stay in love, to feel desirable and attracted to one another, with a deep and comfortable friendship. We want more laughter, fun, and family memories. And we want spiritual nourishment: prayer and study and talking about eternal things together.

Ultimately we hope to gain exaltation and watch our children “walk in truth.” (3 Jn. 1:4.)

Accomplishing this can be difficult in a troubled world like ours. But when Dan and I are nearly overwhelmed by the turbulence around us, I am reminded of the painting Peace. It is a painting of a small bird sitting on
her nest, built on a slender branch out over Niagara Falls. I envision our marriage: warm, happy, and spiritual, in a home that reminds me of the peaceful bird on her nest. Dan and I have learned that our home can match our dreams as we use love, laughter, and spirituality to create a celestial marriage.

**Love**

The heart of our marriage is our love, which grows and is strengthened through righteousness and through good communication.

A few days before our wedding, Dan said, “I may not always know what is right, but I promise that if I do know, I will do it.” Then, early on the morning of our wedding day, he wrote a letter and mailed it to our apartment. It said, in part, “I have just finished talking to my Heavenly Father and have promised this—to try to never speak an unkind or harsh word to you. I will try; eventually I will succeed. Please be patient with me and encourage me.”

I loved his curly hair and the way he could swing a bat, but it would be his righteousness and his kindness that would make my love for him grow.

As our love continues to increase, I am learning how important it is to Dan to see that I am happy. As much as I want to be a size ten and a perfect housekeeper, these are not the things that matter most to him. He needs me to radiate hope. There is no relationship in the world where hope and optimism are more important. He needs to know I am pleased and satisfied with what he is trying to do and trying to be. For the privilege of spending eternity in love, with my family around me, I can work hard at this.

When Dan expresses appreciation for my efforts with our children and our home, I want to do better. When I admire his focus on our family, his diligence in earning a living, his good nature, he does more. If I remember to express gratitude for the qualities I fell in love with, my love grows and is richly reciprocated. If I chip away at his dignity with cutting remarks and criticism, I crumble the very foundation upon which our celestial home must be built.

I have discovered, too, that there is a great difference between a peck on the cheek and a two-arm hug. I have seen how important it is to both of us for my husband, before he leaves in the morning, to stop a moment for a hug. It will last all day, or at least until he arrives home that evening. Then the dosage has to be repeated.

Feelings of love do not necessarily diminish personality differences. Our friend Clair loves sports, especially tennis. His wife, Linda, loves sewing
and cooking. But she chose to sign up for tennis lessons. No one was more proud than Clair the day he and his friend John were beaten by their wives in tennis doubles. Meanwhile, his appreciation for her talents and enjoyments has also blossomed.

I see individual differences as an opportunity for a couple to create a whole that is broader and deeper than either half alone. For example, Dan and I approach decision making from opposite ends. I want to study every angle, and tend to agonize over even small matters. Dan wants to see, quickly analyze (often to himself), decide, and never look back. He has taught me that each approach has value. Through nonjudgmental communication, we can decide together which approach best fits a given situation.

As husbands and wives, we can expect to keep adjusting to one another all our lives while we each struggle with personal growth and the trials of mortality. But we need to remember and focus on the core of common beliefs we share. The moments we spend saying “I love you because ...,” “Thank you for ...,” “I’m so proud of you for ...,” “I’m sorry for ...,” and then including a two-arm hug, can enrich our eternal relationship because they nourish our love, the very soul of our marriage.

**Laughter**

Laughter can sometimes be as far from happiness as lust is from love. Whenever we make our spouses the butt of a joke, or belittle them with degrading humor, we offend not only them but also our Father in Heaven. This kind of laughter is never appropriate.

But using healthy humor to smooth the trials of life is part of a happy home. Couples marry each other in part because they are happy when they are together. How wonderful it is when, after marriage, they continue to make each other laugh. Dan’s humor, in all kinds of situations, has been a delight and a balm to our family. One day when I was doing some hand sewing, I lost my needle in the carpet. Dan knelt down to find it. As I started to help, he said, “No, don’t. I’m sure I’ll run it into my hand any minute.”

Every marriage has incidents that can become private, lighthearted signals to each other. One of ours began many years ago when Dan told me of an idea that had come to him. We’ve both forgotten what it was, but I must have abruptly squelched it, because he paused, then said, “Well, for just a minute there, I thought it was a great idea.” Now, whenever one of us feels put down and says, “Well, for just a minute there, I thought ...” We both laugh, and the message is clear and friendly.

There are some family crises that can become laughable lessons. My aunt
and uncle, both fond of practical jokes played on themselves and others, lived on a ranch without running water. One cold, rainy evening, my uncle came in drenched to see his wife sitting comfortably by the fireplace. She said, “Dear, since you’re already wet and cold, will you bring in a bucket of water?” He went out and returned with the water, dumped it on her, and said, “Now you’re wet and cold. Could you go get the water?” They laughed as they retold the story, and the incident became a family joke. So now when we really shouldn’t ask a favor, or when we realize we are imposing, we start the request with, “Since you’re already wet and cold ...,” and the job usually gets done with a smile.

A key to unlocking healthy fun in marriage is faith—faith in God, in each other, and in the future—faith enough to relax and enjoy the day we are now living. With faith, we can even see some humor in our trials.

**Spirituality**

If we want the spirit of the Lord in our marriages and in our homes, we must “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny [our]selves of all ungodliness.” (Moro. 10:32.) If Christ would not say it, we will not say it, even at home. If Christ would sacrifice to sanctify a relationship, so will we—especially at home. Spirituality is loving what Christ loves. It is wanting a celestial marriage enough to let go of telestial attitudes. A telestial attitude is selfish, with the focus on my needs, my pleasure, my time. Terrestrial attitudes—worrying too much about what others think—hurt marriage, too. Is our family comparable to those around us? Is our home nice enough? What do our neighbors think of the way we spend our leisure time?

Since we are sons and daughters of celestial parents, our spirits respond with joy when we live like celestial people. A marriage built on celestial principles has a power available to it that is greater than our combined strength.

While we were expecting our ninth child, an examination revealed that I had cancer. The doctors could not determine the source or extent without endangering the baby, and she wasn’t old enough to survive birth. But they did know the cancer was spreading. So we were asked to decide whether the doctors should operate despite the risk, or if they should wait until the baby had developed more fully.

To me there seemed to be no answer. I wanted to live and to rear our eight children. But I also felt protective of the child I was carrying. We struggled for several weeks, giving the baby more time to mature, prayerfully seeking to know the will of the Lord. Our answer came when, after much prayer
and fasting, Dan said to me, “Barbara, it will be all right. I have scheduled surgery.”

Because of priesthood power, he could do more than make that difficult decision. He called our home teacher, a neighbor who had had his own struggle with cancer, and my brother. In the name of Jesus Christ, my husband, assisted by those men, blessed me and our baby that what was done would be best for both of us.

Dan again wrote me a letter the night before surgery: “These past days have been filled with more anxiety and soul searching for me than any time in my life. … As we have passed through swells of faith and depths of fear, I have experienced a purging I didn’t know I needed. The priesthood blessings you have received are from the Lord. Tonight as we sat in your hospital room, I was aware of your struggle between fear and faith. I experienced it myself for many hours after I returned home. Just now I have received, with burning assurance, the Lord’s seal upon the blessings you have received. … [The doctors], as instruments in the hands of our Father in Heaven, will do what is needed to perform His work.”

The surgery was successful. Our healthy daughter, now fifteen years old, was born seven weeks later.

Our burdens and challenges continue, but we are still striving to improve. Dan is living the promise he made on our wedding day. He does what he knows is right. He is never harsh or unkind. I am learning how to express my happiness and gratitude, and even to make decisions more quickly.

Gerald Lund, a Church Educational System administrator, tells the story of medical personnel taking a truckload of supplies into the jungles of Africa to set up a hospital. The bridges they had to cross were not strong enough to support the truck. Rather than lighten the load by leaving precious supplies behind, they stopped at each river or ravine to strengthen the bridge. (“Strengthening the Bridges,” Book of Mormon Symposium, Provo, Utah, 1986.)

When we set out to build a celestial marriage, we have no choice but to carry the whole load the whole way. We cannot drop off the heavy things, such as problems with children, financial burdens, or poor health. When we, in our problem-solving truck, reach a chasm, sometimes we must be willing to stop and strengthen the bridge for our marriage to get through.

When we do so, our love increases and together we find happiness. We also draw closer to the Lord and come to know of our Savior’s deep concern for our family.
If we are faithful to marriage covenants made in the temple, the Lord has promised that we “shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths … and … shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to [our] exaltation and glory in all things.” (D&C 132:19.)

If Dan and I are together forever, we will both be perfected. My challenges for today are to see my sweetheart now with that eternal potential, to patiently work on my own imperfections, and to let the Lord influence my husband to work on his. Through love, laughter, and spirituality, the two of us will work together toward exaltation.

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